

1 ANALYZING MOVIES



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The Cameraman (Edward Sedgwick, Jr., 1928)

What do we talk about when we talk about movies? As with all first impressions, the conversation begins with likes and dislikes, subjective responses that reflect our experience, knowledge, and temperament.

What we say and how strongly we say it—we often talk about movies in terms of love and hate—rather raise the stakes. If you love a certain film and recommend it to a friend, how do you feel when they like it, too? How bad do you feel when they hate it?

Many of the subjective reactions we have to a movie are the consequence of careful creative design, the result of choices about story structure, visual design, camerawork, editing, and sound made to prompt us to react in certain ways, to get us thinking about things from a particular point of view, to make us see and hear things in a specific order and manner. Film analysis enables us to recognize how the filmmakers have worked their magic on us, how all the constituent elements of the film have combined to create that magic. Rather than rob us of the pleasures of watching films, this approach affords us the even greater pleasure of deep engagement. This first chapter begins with the question of why we are drawn to the movies and then introduces and models a scholarly approach to the cinema.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- 1-1** Identify the basic human desires and drives that cinema seems to satisfy and understand how various mental processes produce the illusion of motion pictures.
- 1-2** Recognize the art in entertaining films and the entertainment value in films that are complex or challenging.
- 1-3** Understand what it means to analyze films and recognize what makes the scholarly practice of film criticism different from more subjective and impressionistic reactions to and readings of movies.



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1-1 THE MAGIC OF MOVIES

As we ponder our attraction to motion pictures, it is worth thinking about the basic human desires and drives that cinema seems to satisfy, about what made cinema possible, even inevitable. Such a project takes us back as much as 30,000 years to the earliest pictorial expressions carved into and painted on cave walls at Chauvet and Lascaux, images viewed communally by our predecessors by torchlight, anticipating the phenomenon of going to the movies (fig. 1.1).

What motivated the cave painters was perhaps not so different from what motivated early filmmakers: the fundamental human desire to express oneself, to preserve for posterity images drawn from everyday life, to render tangible and real a particular and peculiar take on the world. And the undeniable presence of an aesthetic, their attention to design and detail, suggests that these artists cared what their audience thought about what they produced. The artist's urge to create an experience for an audience, and the audience's ability to be engaged by that creation, are still at work in the contemporary medium of film.

1-1a The Moving Image

Although the experience of viewing an image illuminated in the darkness extends back into prehistory, the projection of images for public entertainment is a somewhat more recent phenomenon, dating to the eighteenth century and the “magic lantern.” This device employed a lens, a shutter, and a persistent light source that projected



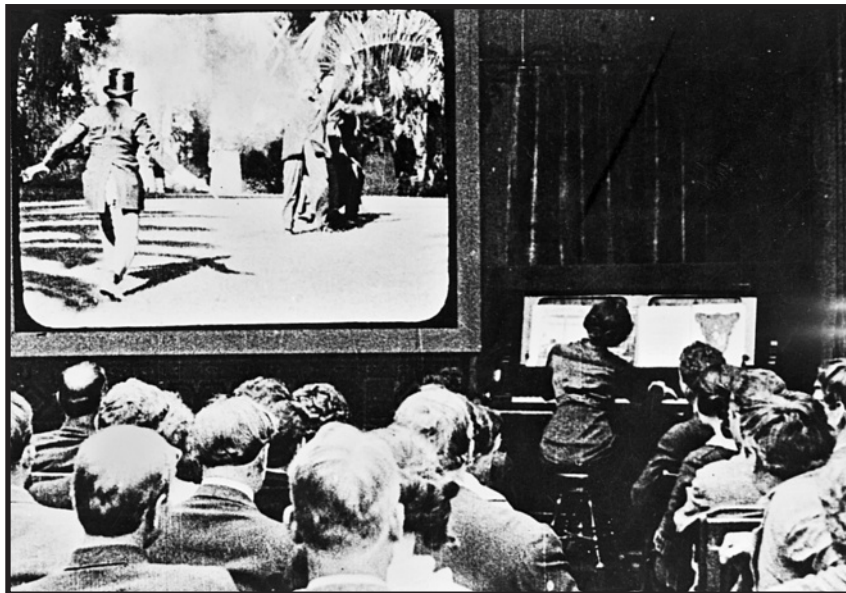
1.1 In his 2010 documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, Werner Herzog explored the caves at Chauvet, France, where in the mid-1990s archaeologists discovered paintings dating back more than 30,000 years.



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1.2 Emile Reynaud's Praxinoscope moving image viewer (ca. 1887).

etched images from glass slides onto a white wall in the dark. Audiences were fascinated by the power of the lantern operator (usually a magician) to conjure ghostlike images out of the shadows. Over time inventors improved on the quality of the light source, and by the early to mid-nineteenth century the magic lantern was used in conjunction with motion toys. Motion toys like the Thaumatrope (a round card with multiple images held on a string), the Phenakistoscope (a platelike slotted disc spun to simulate moving images), the Zoetrope (a bowl-like apparatus with slots for viewers to peer through), and the Praxinoscope (fig. 1.2) gave audiences their first glance at multiple, continuous, moving images, their first glance at what would someday be transformed into a new mass medium.



1.3 A screening of a Keystone short in 1913. Silent film exhibition featured noticeable flickering light due to its relatively slow speed through the gate of the projector.

The content of these early moving images was rudimentary and largely irrelevant: hand-drawn horses galloping, two children playing leapfrog. The star attraction was the technology itself; the audience was asked merely to bear witness to the phenomenon of seeing pictures move. That phenomenon hinged upon a fundamental trick or lie, what film historians and theorists call persistence of vision or positive afterimages, and what many physicists understand as the phi phenomenon or apparent motion. **Persistence of vision** refers to the tendency for one image to persist or linger on our retina as the next image enters our perception, which explains why we do not perceive the black frames that separate the still images as motion picture film passes through the projector. Apparent motion, or the **phi phenomenon**, describes an optical illusion that allows us to perceive constant movement instead of a sequence of images. Together these phenomena create the impression or perception of a single continuous moving image despite the reality of a series of individual **frames**.

Another trick, or misperception, involves **critical flicker fusion**, a phenomenon in which the light of a film projector flashes so rapidly with each new frame that we do not see it pulse but instead see a continuous beam of light. Motion toys and silent movies (which were shot and projected at the relatively slow speed of 16 frames per second) did display a distinct flicker (fig. 1.3), hence the slang term for silent movies, “flickers,” and the occasionally used synonym for movies today, “flicks.” Sound films do not display such a flicker because they are shot and projected at the significantly faster 24 frames per second (fps).

1-1b Modern Moviegoing

Over time, the moviegoing experience has become more seamless. There is no flicker to ignore anymore; 35mm exhibition provides beautiful, gigantic moving images; and the advent of digital formats for production and exhibition have eliminated many of the the medium’s technical glitches. At the movies today we bear witness not only to the stories told in a given film but to the astounding technology that has made that work of art and entertainment possible.

But even with the advent of advanced technologies, movies continue to appeal to our most primitive desires and anxieties: love, happiness, fear, despair. Moviegoing can be simply diverting, or it can be provocative and unsettling. Sometimes it’s both.

The film reviewer Pauline Kael once quipped that she “lost it at the movies,” a wry joke about losing her innocence there in the dark. But it is fair to ponder the opposite effect, that more often than not we *find* things at the movies . . . about ourselves and about our world, things we have otherwise never considered, never thought about deeply.

We study movies because our reactions to them are so powerful, because their role in modern life is so significant, because understanding them informs the way we experience the world. Moviegoing is a unique communal experience, a form of organized leisure that formalizes the expression of shared emotions (laughter, for example, at a screening of the Coen brothers’ *The Big Lebowski* [fig. 1.4]). This book introduces an objective study of such a familiar subjective and communal experience, offering a critical vocabulary for discussing, analyzing, and reflecting upon the movies in our lives.

persistence of vision The tendency for one image to persist or linger on our retina as the next image enters our perception, contributing to the illusion of motion pictures.

phi phenomenon The optical illusion that accounts for the impression of movement when one image follows another at the proper speed.

frame The smallest compositional unit of a reel of film: a single photographic image; also, the boundaries of the image.

critical flicker fusion A phenomenon in which the light of a film projector flashes so rapidly with each new frame that we do not see it pulse but instead see a continuous beam of light.



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1.4 Cinema as communal experience and organized leisure. Two thousand filmgoers endure the rain to share the experience of watching Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski* (1998), a film most of them have already seen. The unlikely setting for this outdoor show was London's eighteenth-century Somerset House courtyard.

1-2 MOVIES AS ENTERTAINMENT AND ART

By the time we reach our teens, we may have seen hundreds, even thousands of films in movie theaters, on television, laptops, tablets, iPods, and even cell phones. We are, as George Orwell predicted we would be, surrounded by screens in public and private spaces. This ubiquity of the moving image seems hardly a cause for alarm, as it was in Orwell's *1984*. Such access has made moviegoing simpler, easier, even cheaper, as more films are now available in more formats and in more venues than ever before.

The medium's continued popularity is a testament to its entertainment value. And this entertainment value has fueled the notion that going to the movies is primarily a means of escape. Escapism is certainly built into certain forms or genres of movies, and it is a design feature of the movie theater, the site of the so-called first run of the vast majority of motion pictures. Movie theaters have fashioned a built environment that is comfortable,

dark, quiet, and temperature-controlled. When we enter this space, we are asked only to sit back and relax. Yet while such an environment seems to set the stage for escapism, the passive consumption of movie fantasies, it also narrows our focus onto one object: the movie we are watching. In our hyper-stimulated world, the movie theater is a rare secular site designed to eliminate distraction and allow for serious reflection.

As critical filmgoers, we can begin to discover the art in entertaining films as well as an entertainment value in films that are challenging. We can bring a sophisticated analysis to movies that define themselves as escapist fun. And for films that are challenging or unusual, there is a pleasure to be had in figuring out a complexly structured plot, and in appreciating and understanding the filmmakers' unusual choices in design, form, and style.



1.5 Buster Keaton as a projectionist dreaming about an exciting life like those lived on screen. *Sherlock Jr.* (Keaton, 1924).



1.6 In the film within the film, Sherlock Jr. wins the heart of the object of his desire.

1-2a Appreciating and Understanding Entertainment

To see how we might move past our first impressions and introduce a critical analysis, we begin with a popular film comedy from the silent era: Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* The film is entertaining; it's funny, and Keaton's stunts are original and exciting. Our initial reaction to the film as it unspools is likely one of appreciation—of Keaton's skill as a performer, of the cleverness of the gags—and that reaction is characterized by laughter, an involuntary response that signals the film's success as entertainment.

Sherlock Jr. is particularly useful for us here at the start of this study because it cleverly displays—in fact, it incorporates into its closing sequence—two key processes that characterize our reception of films: **identification** (something in the film reminds us of our own experience) and **idealization** (we think: if only our lives were quite like this!). As we begin to read the film critically—much as we would closely read a novel or poem, for example—we recognize these two processes not only in the context of this film but with regard to our general filmgoing as well.

The film tells the story of a shy and bumbling film projectionist who is falsely accused of stealing a watch, an accusation that promises to nix a budding romantic relationship. Forlorn, he returns to work and as the film he projects unspools, he falls asleep and dreams (fig. 1.5). In his dream he jumps into the movie screen and takes control of the story underway there. On screen he is the crack detective Sherlock Jr. He is everything he is

not in real life: confident, remarkably agile, an adept deductive thinker. And most important (to this point in the film), unlike the projectionist, Sherlock Jr. “gets the girl” (fig. 1.6).

For the hapless projectionist, movies are the site of dreams and aspirations. At this particularly low point in his personal life, he imagines what it might be like to be the hero of a movie instead of the man paid to project it. For the critical filmgoer it is important not to miss the parallels between the projectionist's imagined participation in the fiction on screen and our own experience at the movies.

When the projectionist wakes from his dream, we return to the “real world.” The dream—structured as a film within the film—has ended with his triumph over adversity. Waking up in the projection booth is at first a bit of a disappointment; he is no longer the hero in a miraculous rescue. But this disappointment is short-lived; his girlfriend has arrived, and she reveals that while he's slept she has solved the case of the stolen watch. Her discovery clears the way for romance.

But the film does not end there. In what silent comedians called a “kick-in-the-pants ending,” the film's brief coda reflects explicitly on the processes of identification

identification A mode of engagement with film content; something in the film reminds us of our own experience, and we tend to identify with the relevant character and his or her situation.

idealization A mode of engagement with film content; something in the film resonates with our dreams and aspirations: if only our lives were quite like this!



1.7–1.17 Life imitating art. The hapless projectionist learns a thing or two about romance at the movies.

and idealization. Still groggy and still unsure of himself, the projectionist is alone with his girlfriend in the projection booth, and all suspicion has abated. He wonders what to do. Then he looks to the screen for help. And there he finds some useful instruction. The film ends with a series of alternating **shots** of the projection booth and the film playing on screen (figs. 1.7–1.17). (A shot is an image produced from a single “take” on the

shot A continuously exposed, uninterrupted, or unedited piece of film of any length; a basic unit of film structure with discernible start and end points.

film set.) By contrasting the “real” world of the projectionist with the contrived world of *Sherlock Jr.*, Keaton both satirizes the movie melodramas that were popular with 1920s American audiences and also underscores how important they had become in the collective imagination. The ending produces not only a laugh but also an invitation to wake up to how we have identified with and idealized life as it is depicted in the movies.

A film released three-quarters of a century later, *The Matrix*, poses a similar set of challenges as it asks us as critical filmgoers to see past its screen fantasy to find a more complex, more global, more philosophical work. *The Matrix* is an entertaining film in the way, or more



1.18 Even the most implausible of films can get us thinking about the world in which we live now and the world in which we may live someday. *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry/Lana Wachowski, 1999).

accurately, at a scale that only blockbusters can be. It is big, fast, and loud—a Hollywood spectacle *par excellence*. It is designed to transport us, excite us, and even thrill us. But it is also a deceptively complex work: a unique amalgam of stop- and slow-motion photography (fig. 1.18), a clever adaptation of cyberpunk science-fiction literature, and an evocation of Asian action film and comic-book graphics and visuals. It may be good escapist fun, but it engages complex ideas in complex ways. Careful and close reading prompts an analysis that reflects upon our growing dependence on and fascination with immersive technologies—technologies that may well affect our humanity in profound ways.

Examining what we sometimes call a film’s deeper meanings in no way detracts from the euphoric

sensation of watching the film, of being pinned to our seats by the imagery and sound. Indeed, thinking about these meanings helps us situate the film and the sensation it produces in terms of our own lives and intellectual experience.

1-2b Appreciating and Understanding Complex Films

Some films are more difficult to “get into” than others. They are deliberately designed to challenge our belief systems and our expectations about movies, life, and the world at large. When watching such films, we need to be a bit more patient. The pleasure is less immediate and the processes of identification and idealization are less easily engaged. These films require critical analysis for engagement, even entertainment, which makes them well suited to the task ahead in this book.

The modern Japanese film *Vengeance Is Mine* is for many viewers an example of difficult entertainment. The film tells the fact-based story of Akira Nishiguchi (he is called Iwao Enokizu in the film), who went on a killing spree in the early 1960s. Shohei Imamura’s film gives us plenty of access to the killer, but it makes little effort to help us understand him. The performance of Ken Ogata, the actor who portrays Iwao, magnifies the character’s intent to keep others—including the viewer—at a distance.

Vengeance Is Mine opens with the killer in a police car. As the plot works backward from his capture, we expect to find an explanation for Iwao’s actions in the film’s flashbacks (fig. 1.19). But Imamura resists such an easy sociology. The killer’s life is eventful but paradoxically empty.

The film’s title also frustrates our attempts to understand what has motivated the crime. It offers a familiar New Testament allusion (to Romans 12:19) and more specifically suggests that the killings are meant as retribution. But Iwao hardly leaves the task of vengeance to the Lord, as the Biblical quotation requires, and nothing in the story supports the notion that he is



1.19 The banality of evil. Shohei Imamura’s *Vengeance Is Mine* (*Fukushû suru wa ware ni ari*, 1979) endeavors to challenge our expectations about crime dramas and the nature of crime itself. The film frustrates our attempts to understand why Iwao (shown here daydreaming during a police interrogation) committed murder.

killing because he has read or misread the Biblical passage or that he is seeking vengeance. Indeed he feels no discernible euphoria in dispatching his victims.

Vengeance Is Mine is hard work, but the payoff is considerable. Most crime films are satisfying because they reduce evil to narrative formulas. When Imamura's film forces us out of this comfort zone, so to speak, we have to look for another reason why we're witnessing this story, another reason why the evil we see in the film exists. As we analyze the film, we come to reconsider the nature of evil in modern society and arrive at the chilling notion that sometimes people do bad things and even they don't know why.

In his popular 1968 feature *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick takes up a familiar sci-fi story: in deep space a computer malfunctions and the crew is put in grave danger. But despite this familiar hook, he seems up to something else in the film, something more.

As we look at the film's narrative structure and pacing, for example, we find the first of many challenges posed by the filmmaker. Kubrick takes us *slowly* into the narrative. The film begins not in deep space but with a long section titled "The Dawn of Man" in which a series of connected scenes track the evolution of human ancestors, shown first walking on all fours, then upright; first truly primitive, then capable of transforming found objects into tools and weapons (fig. 1.20).

As with many such complex and challenging films, we need to be patient. We need to find pleasure in the director's resistance to formula and his thwarting of audience expectation. Certainly Kubrick is using these early scenes to comment upon human nature, but it is fair to wonder even late in the film what the "Dawn of Man" opening has to do with the rest of the story. Filmgoers for over a generation have pondered these questions, which is evidence of the pleasure that can be had through the hard work of making sense of this difficult film.

One of the pleasures of critical analysis is experienced when we finally feel like we are in on the joke, so to speak, when we begin to "get" what the filmmakers seem



1.20 "The Dawn of Man" in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) asks us to ponder the nature of humankind.



1.21 The film's climax portrays the nature of modern humanity in a struggle against the machines we've made. But what does this have to do with the film's opening gambit, "The Dawn of Man"?

to be doing with all the painstaking detail in the design of the sets and, with regard to *2001*, in the re-creations of objects and machines floating in space. We are shown a space toilet, for example, complete with warnings about its use in a weightless environment. The camera stays on the instructions long enough to give us time to read them so that we can imagine ourselves in the world of the film, having to use that bathroom, thinking about the travails of space travel in a way we likely never had before.

In the film's climactic confrontation, which hinges on the struggle between human beings and the technology they have made (fig. 1.21), Kubrick refuses to play the scene straight. To defy our expectations, the tone is that of an absurd comedy. The goal here is not really science fiction but instead a familiarity that fuels identification. Anyone who has struggled with a piece of technology or with some mindless operative on the other end of a phone line has a sense of how the astronaut Dave feels when he asks the supercomputer HAL



1.22 The neighborhood matriarch, “Mother Sister,” looks out on another hot sunny day. Note how details like the peeling paint on the windowsill and the broken concrete on the step suggest not only a setting but a certain social-class milieu. *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989).



1.23 The working poor: the oft-abused Korean store-owners in *Do the Right Thing*.

to open the pod-bay doors, and HAL rather blankly and calmly remarks that he’d prefer not to.

Some films, like Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, deliberately refuse to deliver escapist entertainment and instead challenge audiences to engage with complex questions of morality and social justice. Lee’s film is set in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, in the late 1980s during a heat wave (fig. 1.22). The milieu is atypical for a commercial American film; most of the setting’s inhabitants are people of color, and there are few images of wealth or privilege in sight. The setting is not used as a means of comparison (to life as it is lived in “better” parts of town); we never leave the neighborhood. Here, again, identification plays a part. For an hour or two we are asked to experience imaginatively and intellectually the everyday



1.24 The nonworking poor. ML, Sweet Dick Willie, and Coconut Sid hold their daily vigil across the street from the Korean convenience store they so despise.



1.25 Radio Raheem captured in low-angle close-up, his size and his African features exaggerated as he looms above the camera.

dramas that emerge from the incipient racism, white paternalism, and abject poverty that impact life there.

The two successful businesses we see in the film—the mini-mart and Sal’s Pizzeria—are owned by neighborhood outsiders, Korean Americans and Italian Americans, respectively. Their success seems at odds with and perhaps at the expense of the African American denizens of the neighborhood. In play then are matters of class and race that complexly come into contest. While no one in the film is wealthy, a separate set of distinctions among the working class, the working poor, and the out-of-work are first drawn and then complicated by exaggerated racial stereotypes: the hard-working Korean store-owners (fig. 1.23), the patronizing Italian-American restaurateur, and the shiftless African Americans who sit in lawn chairs drinking all day or hold menial jobs they half-heartedly perform (fig. 1.24). The film so obviously

panders to cultural stereotypes that it asks us to examine them.

It is important when accounting for the social implications of a film to focus on its formal elements and its formal system. For example, it is well worth noting that to highlight racial differences, Lee uses exaggerated close-ups, often featuring characters looming over and talking directly into the camera (fig. 1.25). Like the film, this stylistic choice is unsubtle but effective.

The film explores gender issues in the African-American community, and again Lee exploits familiar stereotypes: the benevolent but weary neighborhood matriarch Mother Sister, the young unwed mother Tina, the shiftless delivery boy and absentee father Mookie

(played by the director himself), the politicized but mostly uninformed Buggin' Out, and the boom-box-toting, ever-angry Radio Raheem.

Cultural studies scholars use the term “identity politics” to discuss the relationship between the artist and the artist’s message about race, class, and gender. This is very much at issue here. The producer-writer-director of *Do the Right Thing* is Spike Lee, an African American who grew up in Brooklyn. It is relevant then that the film is not the work of an outsider looking in but that of an insider looking closely at social problems and issues in his own community. Lee’s well-suitedness for such a social critique is essential to appreciating the film’s authentic commentary and larger cultural significance.

1-3 HOW TO “READ” A FILM

The goal of this book is to help you develop the vocabulary and tools for critical thinking and to facilitate the critical analysis of any film that you see, whether it aims to be a work of entertainment, a work of art, or both. As a first step in that process, let’s consider the bigger picture. What does it mean to analyze films? What makes the scholarly practice of film criticism different from the subjective process of reviewing movies for a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down assessment? How do we move beyond the basics of whether or not we like a film?

We begin with close observation, of the sort suggested by the questions that are provided at the end of each chapter. We might focus our attention on the distinct formal elements of a film (the subjects of chapters 2 through 5) and how those elements interact. We might also think about the film in the context of other similar

films and/or in its larger historical, cultural, and industrial contexts (chapters 7 and 9). As we put these ideas together, we construct an interpretation of the film’s meaning(s) and significance.

1-3a Form and Style

In its most basic sense, **form** is the visual and aural shape of a film. Form embraces all aspects of a film’s construction that can be isolated and discussed: the elements of narrative, mise-en-scène (the “look of the scene”), camerawork, sound, and editing. Film **style** refers to the particular or characteristic use of these elements. Film style may be associated with a time and place (e.g., **classical Hollywood**), with a type of film (e.g., a western), with a director’s body of work (Hitchcock-ian; Fellini-esque), or it may be unique to an individual film. We might characterize a film’s style as realistic (fig. 1.26) or we might recognize it as highly stylized (fig. 1.27).

To illustrate what it means to examine form and style in a film, let’s take a close look at a key scene from the **French New Wave** director François Truffaut’s first feature film, *The 400 Blows*. In this scene, the film’s adolescent hero, Antoine, has been detained at a police station after stealing (and attempting to return) a typewriter from his father’s office.

In terms of story structure, we are at the film’s turning point. Antoine has been at odds with his parents and teachers, and his attempts to escape punishment have gotten him into deeper and deeper trouble. Now he faces truly serious consequences. So far the film has alternated between episodes of freewheeling youthful hijinks,

form The visual and aural shape of a film. Form embraces all aspects of a film’s construction that can be isolated and discussed: the elements of narrative, mise-en-scène (the “look of the scene”), camerawork, sound, and editing.

style The particular or characteristic use of formal elements.

classical Hollywood The so-called “studio era,” roughly from the advent of sound through World War II. Distinguished by an approach to filmmaking that strove for an “invisible style” that allowed viewers to become absorbed by the world of the film.

French New Wave A group of post–World War II French directors including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda, all of whom strove to create a more spontaneous and personal style of filmmaking. Many of these directors began as film critics for the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*.



1.26 Natural light, real locales and interiors, and improvisational acting are aspects of the realistic style of John Cassavetes's *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976). So, too, is the inclusion of shots that “break the rules” of Hollywood filmmaking, such as this one, where the woman’s arm obscures our view of the film’s principal character in mid-sentence. This “mistake” gives the impression that the story is captured “on the fly.”



1.27 In Joseph Lewis’s gangster drama *The Big Combo* (1955), the highly stylized lighting, sets, costuming, dialogue, and line delivery place us in the hard-boiled urban jungle. This style, known as **film noir** and associated with crime films from the 1940s and 1950s, creates a distinct milieu (a time and place) that evokes feelings of suspense, decadence, and dread.

truancy, and moviegoing and episodes where Antoine is under scrutiny, disapproval, and control. While the police station scene is part of that larger pattern, it signals the beginning of a new phase in Antoine’s life, one of greater confinement and harsher penalties. Watching this scene, we might begin to wonder what has brought Antoine to

this point (his anti-authoritarian nature? his parents’ neglect? his oppressive school?), whether he deserves to be here (does the punishment fit the crime?), and what will happen to him next.

Antoine is taken down a tight corridor into a holding area, where he is placed into a cell with an adult. Time passes. The camera scans the room, taking in the scene: the dingy windowless space, the police officers killing time playing chess and reading the paper (fig. 1.28), the adult prisoner asleep (fig. 1.29), and finally Antoine, asleep as well, oddly at peace with his unfortunate circumstances (fig. 1.30). This is not a melodramatic jailhouse scene but rather one that seems true to the reality of confinement: it is dull and impersonal.

Another moving camera shot follows (fig. 1.31). It chronicles the arrival of three female prisoners (presumably prostitutes), followed by one police officer’s decision to move Antoine to a much smaller cell of his own. All of this is done without a single line of expository dialogue (dialogue meant to advance the story or reveal something important about the characters). Indeed the dialogue in the scene is often drowned out by sound effects (footsteps, the jailers’ keys jingling, the jail cell doors opening and shutting), another aspect of the film’s realist style. In addition to these effects, we eventually hear some childlike music (a simple scale that suggests a child playing the piano) on the soundtrack. This background music, or underscoring, adds a lighter, almost comic mood to the scene.

The next moving camera shot pauses twice to offer two beautifully framed shots from Antoine’s point of view, looking out through the fence-like cell door

film noir A French term for a style originating with American crime films of the 1940s and 1950s, characterized by deep shadows, night scenes, shady characters, and plots involving elaborate schemes and betrayals.

(figs. 1.32 and 1.33). The camera shot through bars becomes a visual **motif**, or repeated element, from this point on and we are prompted to think about its significance in the larger scheme of the movie (which deals with other such confined spaces like the tiny apartment and the school where Antoine feels similarly imprisoned).

The camera returns to Antoine as the subject of our gaze (fig. 1.34). His placement within the frame (the boundaries of the image) is significant. He has been backed into the corner, both literally and figuratively, and he is trapped.

Through a close study of this scene, then, we can see how it operates to create a moving portrait of Antoine as he is branded a criminal and herded into the penal system. When developing an interpretation of this scene, we might think about how these elements contribute to the film's themes, to the insights on human experience that the film offers. Some of the themes that critics have seen in this film include the unjust treatment of juvenile offenders, the roots of adolescent rebellion, the stifling of creativity and freedom by rule-bound institutions, and the importance of truth in both human relationships and film techniques.

1-3b Text and Context

Information culled from research about a film's historical or critical context can deepen our analysis. Continuing to use *The 400 Blows* as our sample text, let's explore what such a contextual reading might involve. First, the film is semi-autobiographical; it is largely composed of the director's reflections on his own fraught relationship with his family and institutional authority at public school, at

motif Repeated images, lines of dialogue, or musical themes that are significant to a film's meaning.



▶ **1.28–1.30** A single moving camera shot surveys the scene in *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, François Truffaut, 1959).



▶ **1.31** “I saw a police station in a movie once, and it was a lot cleaner.” One of the female prisoners makes a wisecrack that highlights Truffaut's departure from film artifice.



▶ **1.32 and 1.33** Bars upon bars. We see through Antoine's eyes and feel his confinement.



▶ **1.34** As we closely examine this image, we begin to appreciate Antoine's deepening alienation and hopelessness.

church, and in prison. It also depicts Truffaut's instinctive, early love of cinema; much as in the film, the movie theater became the site of Truffaut's escape as a youngster and foregrounded his career as an adult. When we consider this biographical information, we can understand the narrative's loose structure; we can put in context how such a narrative style resembles

the fragmentary nature of the author's childhood memories. And we can more fully appreciate the events in the story because they are likely true and speak directly of the author's experience.

Another context would be Truffaut's *œuvre*—his collected work as a director. Especially relevant here are the four other Truffaut films that depict the **protagonist** introduced in *The 400 Blows*, Antoine, at different stages of his life: the short subject *Antoine and Colette* (1962) and the features *Stolen Kisses* (1968), *Bed and Board* (1970), and *Love on the Run* (1979). Each film is autobiographical and we can observe subtle changes in the tone and content meant to match the maturity of the protagonist (Antoine and, by extension, Truffaut).

We might also consider the film in the context of the French New Wave, a group of post–World War II French directors that includes Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Alain Resnais, and Agnes Varda. Many of these directors began as film critics for the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* and made the transition from writing about to making movies to practice what they preached, to usher in a new, more modern French cinema.

Much as *The 400 Blows* chronicles the painful transition from childhood to adulthood, the New Wave movement in general concerned itself with a painful transition from pre-war fascism and wartime collaboration, from a rural, Catholic, and conservative nation into a more modern, urbanized, youth-oriented society untainted by the war and more in tune with the popular consumer culture of swing-

ing London and the United States. Such a transition required a new, more immediate and realistic visual style, one that abandoned the moribund storytelling of

protagonist The film's hero.

the established French cinema. *The 400 Blows* is arguably the first important New Wave feature. It is a film that exemplifies this dual effort to better chronicle the realities of post-war France and to revitalize a national cinema that had become dull and passé.

The film foreshadows the social and political upheaval in France that came to a head a full decade after the film's release. It does so by revealing a generation gap already in evidence between Antoine's war-era parents and the post-war youth Truffaut's hero comes to represent. The film ably critiques adult authority in

general and the institutions (family, school) and agencies (police) charged with maintaining the older generation's control.

The industrial context is meaningful too: *The 400 Blows* was produced on a tight budget. It is quite likely that some of the filmmaker's choices were economic as well as aesthetic, which is to say that Truffaut's use of a realist style may well have also been a budgetary matter. All of these contexts can be elaborated upon, and any one of them might provide an avenue for thinking critically and writing about the film.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Movies are a product of careful creative design, the result of choices about story structure, visual design, camerawork, editing, and sound. A film analysis that takes a close look at these constituent elements enables us to understand and appreciate movies.

1-1 THE MAGIC OF MOVIES

Learning Outcome: *Identify the basic human desires and drives that cinema seems to satisfy and understand how various mental processes produce the illusion of motion pictures.*

- The basic human desires and drives that cinema seems to satisfy can be traced back as much as 30,000 years to the earliest pictorial expressions on cave walls at Chauvet and Lascaux, images viewed communally by our predecessors by torchlight.
- The projection of images for public entertainment dates to the eighteenth century and the “magic lantern.” Combining magic lantern and motion toy technologies in the nineteenth century gave audiences their first glance at multiple, continuous, moving images.
- Various mental processes—such as persistence of vision, the phi phenomenon, and critical flicker fusion—create the illusion of motion pictures. The movie theater is that rare public site built and used for an egalitarian, communal ritual during which we express nakedly emotions we elsewhere repress.

1-2 MOVIES AS ENTERTAINMENT AND ART

Learning Outcome: *Recognize the art in entertaining films and the entertainment value in films that are complex or challenging.*

- As we begin to look at films analytically, we discover the art in entertaining films and an entertainment value in films that are difficult or challenging.
- Two key processes characterize our reception of films: identification (something in the film reminds us of our own experience) and idealization (we think: if only our lives were quite like this!).

- Examining films on a deeper level in no way detracts from the euphoric sensation of watching the film, of being pinned to our seats by the imagery and sound. Indeed, thinking about these meanings helps us situate the film and the sensation it produces in terms of our own lives and intellectual experience.
- Some films are more difficult to “get into” than others. These films require critical analysis for engagement, even entertainment.

1-3 HOW TO “READ” A FILM

Learning Outcome: *Understand what it means to analyze films and recognize what makes the scholarly practice of film criticism different from more subjective and impressionistic reactions to and readings of movies.*

- Close reading, or textual analysis, involves a focus on the distinct formal elements of a film and the interaction of those elements.
- Form is the visual and aural shape of a film. Form embraces all aspects of a film’s construction that can be isolated and discussed: the elements of narrative, mise-en-scène (the “look of the scene”), camerawork, sound, and editing.
- Film style refers to the particular or characteristic use of the elements of form and can include consideration of a time and place (e.g., classical Hollywood), a type of film (e.g., a western), or a director’s larger body of work (Hitchcock-ian or Fellini-esque). Style may also, instead, be unique to an individual film.
- Information culled from research about a film’s historical or industrial contexts can deepen our analysis.

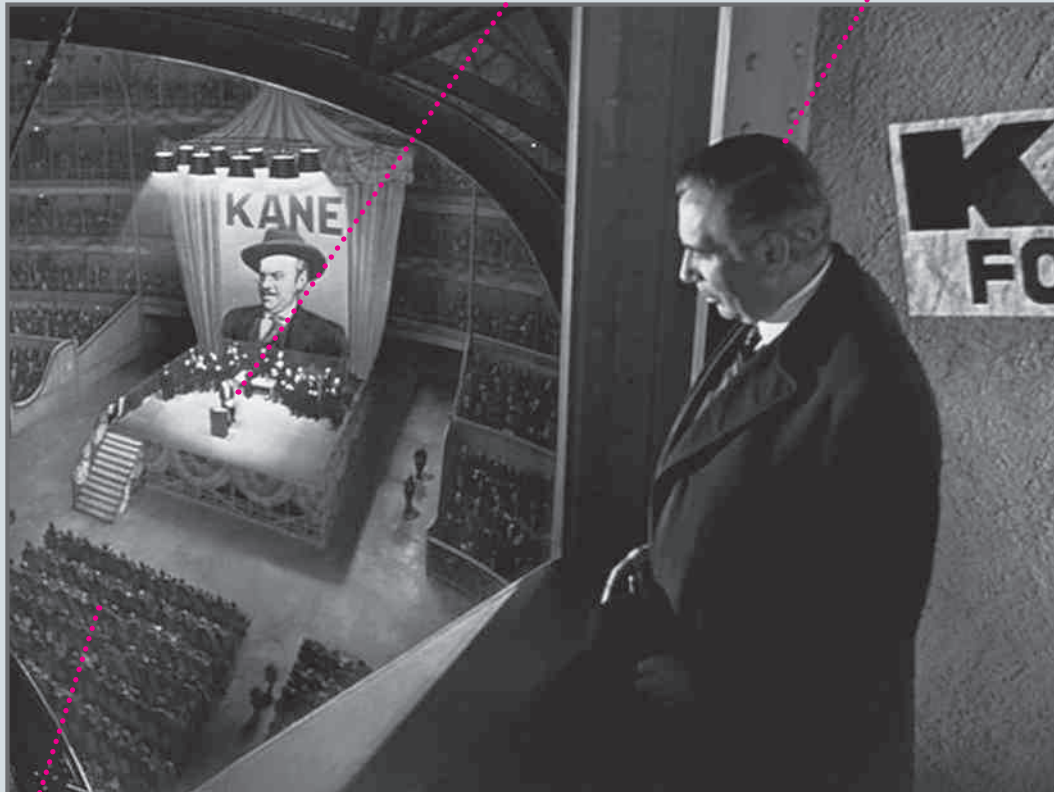
FOCUS on Analyzing Films: *Citizen Kane*

Orson Welles's 1941 film *Citizen Kane* is known for its deep focus photography, its multiple narrators, and its defiance of the strictures of classical Hollywood. In the shot below, from a turning point in the story, Kane is addressing a crowd at a political rally in his bid for governor. His political opponent and personal enemy, Jim Gettys, looks on. Gettys's presence at the rally likely means he's sizing up the opposition, or he's got something up his sleeve. Both, it turns out, fit the bill here. As we will discover in a subsequent scene, Gettys has proof of Kane's infidelity that will effectively kill Kane's chances at the polls. The formal elements of the image hint at a change in the power relations between the two men.

The full range of this shot is in focus so that we can see Gettys, Kane, Kane's associates, and the audience clearly. We are meant to take in the relationships among these three groups.

Kane has appeared larger than life throughout much of the film. Now, suddenly he is small and insignificant.

The space that Gettys occupies fills almost half of the frame. He stands high above the rally. His size and position suggest that he is in control of the situation.



The "people" look like tiny pawns in this scene.

Kane's speech (which can be heard in this scene) attacks Gettys and his political machine as corrupt forces that have betrayed the trust of hardworking people. He promises to give power to the people. This image, however, undercuts his words. It suggests the futility of the kind of populism espoused by Kane and popular at the time the movie was made.

ANALYZE MOVIES

Use these questions to begin practicing the skills of film analysis, focusing especially on aspects of content and context. If you are not assigned a particular film, choose a scene from a film you are especially familiar with and fond of (much as I have chosen the jailhouse scene in *The 400 Blows*). Watch it again a few times. Then answer the following questions.

- What is your initial, subjective reaction to this scene and why?
- Do the processes of identification and idealization apply to your reading of this scene?
- Is the film in which you find this scene by design a work of entertainment or art? If it is a work of entertainment, what aspects of film art can you find? If it is more an art film, what makes it entertaining?
- See if you can isolate the various aspects of form in the scene. What can you identify in the narrative, mise-en-scène, camerawork, sound, and editing?
- Do some research into the biography and filmography of the film's director. How might his or her biography and filmography inform your reading of the film?